



Big Ideas*

Growing Here

Idea #07:

'Grow up, not out.'

Paying a Price for Our Popularity

A century and a half ago a wave of newcomers transformed life and landscapes in the Cowichan—with profound consequences for the Hul'qumi'num people living here already. Newcomers still flock to our region—and if we don't learn from the past, none of us may like the result.

The number of people living in the Cowichan region grew by 7% between 2001 and 2006, and that trend is forecast to continue into the future. But according to the first-ever check up of our region's environmental health, it's not the *number* of people moving here that should cause us concern. Rather, it's *how* we're making room for new neighbours.

Mostly, our communities are spreading out. And as the 2010 State of the CVRD Environment Report documents, our sprawling settlement pattern is exacting a heavy price on our natural wealth.

Ecologically productive forest and farmland is turning into urbanized landscape—at a steep loss in biodiversity and resilience.

‘Soft’ surfaces, the natural areas where rainwater is captured for slow release or collection in underground aquifers, are being ‘hardened’ as buildings, streets and parking replace vegetation. ‘Hard’ landscapes don’t absorb water and replenish aquifers. If not properly planned and designed, they increase the strain on storm sewers, raise the risk of flooding, erode slopes and injure aquatic wildlife, all while absorbing less water to recharge our aquifers.

Every extra mile we drive from home to work or to shop not only costs us more money for gas, it increases the amount of climate-altering carbon we release into the air. In fact, vehicle exhaust is our number-one greenhouse-gas contributor in the CVRD— vehicles pump out *six times* more GHGs than the next-largest contributor, buildings.

And it might surprise you to know that nearly one-tenth of the greenhouse emissions we’re responsible for come from converting forest to other uses—yet another impact of our settlement pattern.

By contrast, social research confirms that compact, ‘walkable’ communities with car-free access to services and amenities, improve people’s health, mood and sense of connection with neighbours.

Other areas have tackled their sprawl. Some have sharply limited areas zoned for development. Others have left zoning in place, but let landowners in certain rural areas ‘retire’ development rights by selling them to urban property owners, who may apply them to create extra-dense development there. Yet another option might be to use the property tax that all landowners pay to create incentives for more

focused development.

It's no wonder people keep moving to the Cowichan. We enjoy some of the world's best weather, amenities and natural beauty. But if we want to preserve our quality of life for our children as well as future newcomers, we need to act now to create more focused communities.

Sprawl is the single biggest factor contributing to the decline of environmental indicators surveyed in this year's Environment Report. Your CVRD Environment Commission is working to bring about positive change in the Cowichan Region.

Follow what we're doing here or online, and let us know what you think at 12things@cvrdenviron.com.

What's 'sustainable'? Living sustainably means enjoying life today, without depriving future generations of what they will need to enjoy their lives. It applies to everything we take from nature, including the basics of food, water and a stable climate. Right now, we're not living sustainably in the Cowichan. But a first step to getting there is knowing what we're overusing. To learn more, read the entire State of the Environment Report, at <http://www.12things.ca/12things/uploads/FinalSoEReport.pdf>

* In 2009, residents of the CVRD overwhelmingly endorsed the '12 Big Ideas' vision for a Cowichan region that will support a growing population, adapt to a changing climate, and preserve its natural wealth for future generations.